

# Musical Diplomacy



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Music, especially classical music composed or played by Australians, has been something I have promoted as a diplomat, particularly as I became more senior in the service. I have seen it as a device to modify the mono-cultural sporting image so many Australians enjoy projecting abroad.

Logically, I should have been willing during my earlier career to employ my own limited musical talents as a violinist to this end. But as a young man I was reluctant to do so. Let me explain.

I began violin studies in Melbourne at the age of six. My father, Philip, was not keen, but my mother, Mary, was. She became my backer, and my paternal grandmother, Daisy, or Dais for short, my teacher.

Once a week after school at Surrey Hills State School number 2778, I would catch the Riversdale Road tram and alight at Kooyongkoot Road, Hawthorn. There, in a gloomy Victorian mansion divided into flats, Dais would dispense her lessons in her 'music room', a converted ballroom with a signed photograph of the Polish pianist and first Polish Prime Minister, Ignacy Paderewski, over the grand piano.

Dais tried to teach me to play pieces too hard for my uncertain technique. She was fond of Paganini and Lalo, Kreisler and Viotti. She held a stop watch as I tried as quickly as possible to get through the Flight of the Bumble Bee, the orchestral interlude adapted for solo violin in the Rimsky-Korsakov's opera 'The Legend of Tsar Saltan', in which a prince turns into a bee and stings his villainous aunt. I sometimes fantasised that I was the prince and my grandmother the aunt.

When my mother became aware of Dais's bullying, I was promptly packed off to the Melba Conservatorium, where I studied under Basil Jones. When I was about 10, I joined the Victorian Junior Symphony Orchestra. My first concert in the Melbourne Town Hall included Beethoven's Egmont Overture, and Mendelssohn's Piano Concerto No.1 in G minor, with three young female soloists, each playing a movement. At a later concert we accompanied a 16-year old violinist, Chris Kimber, younger brother of Beryl Kimber, who played Mendelssohn's violin concerto in G. The orchestra toured country Victoria with that work.

In 1954, our family moved to Adelaide where my father was asked to open a new branch of the paint company he worked for. My violin tuition continued, first with a rather undisciplined teacher in Colonel Light Gardens, who was usually three sheets to the wind when I turned up for my afternoon lessons. We would make grand and ambitious if not very accurate sounds on piano and violin. My development as a violinist was beginning to drift.

That all changed when two things occurred. First, in 1956, I went to one of Professor John Bishop's famous national music camps, this one at Frencham near Mittagong in New South Wales. I won the camp's tennis competition, but also gained experience playing in chamber

groups. Second, I began studying with Lloyd Davies at the Elder Conservatorium. At the time, Lloyd was one of Adelaide's best violin teachers, and a hard taskmaster. He motivated me to practise with enough focus to perform the first movement of Mozart's violin concerto in A major in the Adelaide Town Hall during the finals of a secondary schools music competition. That performance gained me a scholarship to the Con, and I continued with Lloyd, combining violin lessons with the first year of a Law degree at Adelaide University.

In second year, the times of my lectures in torts, contracts, property and constitutional law two clashed unavoidably with music lessons. It was time for my father and I to have a serious talk. He put it to me that violin could lead to a rank and file slot for me in the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra plus teaching students. Law, on the other hand, could lead to a variety of careers, some quite interesting, not to say lucrative.

Condoleeza Rice was not the only young musician with a distaste for teaching students to murder Beethoven. I also took the safe option. I forsook further serious violin studies and concentrated on completing my law degree, did the requisite two years of articles with the Adelaide law firm of Genders Wilson and Bray, and got myself admitted as a barrister and solicitor to the South Australian Supreme Court. But law was always for me a backup profession. In 1962 I applied for, and was accepted as a cadet diplomat in the Commonwealth Department of External Affairs.

In January 1965, I was posted as a Third Secretary to the Australian Embassy in Tokyo. Like the Chinese and the Koreans, the Japanese love classical western music, and most children learn an instrument. There were many opportunities to form friendships with Japanese officials who played music on the side, and I formed a chamber group with a number of them.

Then Cecile Jamieson, the wife of our political Counsellor, arranged something quite different. The lead cellist in the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Kapucinski was touring Japan at the time, and using her own musical connections, she persuaded him to play with me. We were joined by his Japanese accompanist, Mrs Mikimoto, the diminutive wife of the pearl king, and a concert pianist in her own right. We performed Beethoven's 'Archduke' Trio at a diplomatic concert. It never occurred to me at the time that this might raise Australia's, the Embassy's, or my own cultural profile. After overcoming my feelings of intimidation at playing with such professionals, it was just good fun.

My next two postings – to Rangoon and Tehran – hardly provided opportunities for musical exchanges with the locals. In the early 1970s, Burma was, as it is now, under the iron rule of a collective military dictatorship, at that stage, the Burmese Socialist Program Party. With a handicap of one, its chairman, General Ne Win, had mastered golf, but had no feel for other western disciplines such as art, theatre or music. Furthermore, the BSPP condemned western culture as a remnant of British colonialism, and contact with Western (or any other foreign) diplomats could see Burmese artists jailed without trial.

In 1973, Iran was firmly under the control of the Shahanshah Aryamehr. No one in the diplomatic community, even the French, British and American Embassies with their comprehensive spy networks, suspected that he would fall within six years to Islamic fundamentalists. Meanwhile, there was plenty of western cultural influence in the form of visiting ballet troupes, symphony orchestras and soloists, but they usually performed to elite Tehranians in the Shah's palaces. The Muslim masses confined their musical tastes to traditional Persian music and the plangent ululations of Shiite priests calling them to morning and evening prayer, as they seethed with resentment at the Shah's western reforms and waited semi-patiently for the arrival of the Ayatollah from Paris.

The opportunity of playing music with the locals returned to me when Alison and I were posted with our two children to Manila in 1975. Ferdinand Marcos was moving towards

imposing martial law, while Imelda was buying shoes, and reinforcing the cultural credentials of the Philippines by inviting some famous artists such as Van Cliburn and Nureyev to stay at Malacanang Palace and perform at her new Cultural Centre on Roxas Boulevard. She herself was extremely fond of breaking into song, usually of the most treacly and sentimental kind. Her court toadies were always there to praise her. And there was always a spare seat in a local symphony orchestra for the Australian Embassy's Counsellor to fill, even if he did not avail himself of the opportunity very often.

After Manila, I took time out with a year's study leave at Harvard. There were many opportunities to play with students and staff at the music school, and I kept my technique alive by joining other post-graduate students in chamber groups.

It was not until my first Head of Mission appointment as Bob Hawke's Ambassador to Vietnam in 1983 that I began to realise the potential of an Australian kind of musical diplomacy. Eight years after the end of the Vietnam War, Hanoi was still a desperately poor place. It would have been impossible to imagine then that such luxury hotels as the Sofitel Plaza and the Thong Nhat - now rehabilitated and given back its original French name by Sofitel, the Metropole - would later grace the city. Supplies of food were uncertain and seasonal, housing minimal, clothing and transport basic, and survival heavily dependent on what the Soviets and the Eastern bloc countries could supply.

Hawke's Foreign Minister, Bill Hayden, saw my job as kick-starting the bilateral relationship, stalled by Malcolm Fraser since Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1979. For Fraser, the domino theory was still alive and well, and Bangkok, only four hours tank drive from the Cambodian border, might be the next to fall. He would not reward bad behaviour, and froze our bilateral aid program. Sensibly, neither Hawke nor Hayden believed this, and I was to get on with the job of expanding Australian-Vietnamese trade, and finding worthwhile aid projects.

Most aid, once identified, would be covered under the UN but financed from Canberra. But I also had a small aid fund I could utilise at my discretion. So when in the interests of closer cultural relations we invited the Melbourne pianist Ronald Farren-Price to perform in Vietnam, I had the germ of an idea. Ronald was to give two concerts in Hanoi's grand French Opera House, abandoned, dusty and rat-infested since the war. But when we peeled back the plastic wrapping from the Yamaha concert grand, a gift from the Japanese people, the veneer came off with it, and the instrument was badly out of tune. So I arranged for a piano tuner to come up from Australia to tune the instrument, any others of a similar calibre we could find in Vietnam, and give lessons in the craft of piano tuning to local artisans.

And when the Sydney violinist Don Hazelwood, his clarinettist wife, Anne Menzies, and their pianist, Rachel Valler, came to give a series of concerts in Vietnam, I used the occasion to start a program of donating strings and sheet music to the Hanoi conservatorium, recently relocated back to the capital from their war-time rural bunkers.

As for my actually playing with local musicians, the Vietnamese Politburo was about as unwilling to allow it as had been the Burmese. Diplomats from fraternal socialist countries were welcome, not those from capitalist ones. Except on Beethoven's birthday, when I was permitted to play with some carefully selected locals, formally dressed for the occasion, at equally carefully selected venues, always under the surveillance of KGB-trained local intelligence.

After Vietnam, Bill Hayden sent me as Ambassador to the Republic of Korea, where I served from 1987 to 1989. The Koreans are as devoted to western classical music as the Japanese, and in Seoul I could practice musical diplomacy without constraint. Shortly after my arrival, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra came up for a concert tour. We had arranged for them to play concertos with local soloists, and these concerts were very popular. Other Australian musicians followed, but competition for the attention of Koreans audiences was fierce. Seoul with its wide

selection of modern concert halls was a popular performing destination for many American and European artists.

Olympic Games are not occasions for promoting serious music. So when the Koreans hosted them in Seoul in 1988, I threw a party for the whole Australian team at my residence in the hills of Song Buk Dong. One of my guests was the Australian Minister for Sports, Graeme Richardson. He was accompanied wherever he went by his mate Rennie Rivkin. At the reception, Graeme gave a stirring speech about Australia's sports culture. Appropriate to the tone of the evening, I had arranged for the Australian fusion jazz band Sirocco to perform. Many Australian athletes and their coaches danced till dawn on the tennis court to Sirocco's music.

But I formed a quartet – the Kangaroo Quartet - with some young Korean music students, and we gave concerts. I also played in an orchestra conducted by an American Army Major, himself a fine musician. The brass were drawn from the US Army at Yongsan. At one concert, in one of Seoul's magnificent cathedrals, we combined with a choir, but without having a rehearsal there first. Such was the echo effect of the acoustics and the strength of the brass that the choir and orchestra were always out of synch. Our Major almost had a seizure trying to keep us all together.

From 1990 to 1992, I temporarily left Foreign Affairs and joined the ABC as David Hill's General Manager of Radio Australia. One of my aims was to dilute Radio Australia's wall-to-wall country and western music culture with some serious Australian-composed or performed classical music. My enthusiasm was not shared by my staff. The consensus was that short-wave was not a vehicle for broadcasting music which demanded high fidelity reception. Classical music programs should be left to cameo appearances. Not that it would have mattered who won the debate. In several short years, RA had suffered huge budget cuts and fell from being the most listened-to short-wave broadcaster in the region to a ghost of itself.

I returned to Canberra in 1993, and in 1994 was posted as Ambassador to Mexico, the Central American Republics and Cuba. In presenting my credentials in eight capitals over the first year, I learned a fundamental law of musical diplomacy – that the smaller the country, the longer is its national anthem. Some even have three movements.

Latins have a wonderful sense of African-derived rhythm, reflected in their popular music. The Puerto Rican Juan Luis Guerra and his mixture of vocals, brass, guitars and percussion was my favourite. But Mexico City, where I lived, enjoyed great cultural diversity. Here, the neo-classical marble halls of the Palacio de Bellas Artes echoed to some of the finest musicians in the world, and here also, I found many opportunities to play in chamber groups.

I formed a friendship with the director of the Orquesta Filarmonica de la Ciudad de Mexico, Fernando Lozano, and invited the orchestra's leader to be first violinist of my new Kangaroo Quartet. We performed several times in public. When our new Chancery building was opened, we played Haydn's Emperor Quartet No 42 in C, the slow movement of which became the German National Anthem. As we launched into it, with a wonderful sense of timing, His Excellency the German Ambassador came striding through the double doors and promptly stood at rigid attention. He thought we were playing it for him.

I also formed a piano trio with two excellent female musicians – a Polish cellist and a Mexican pianist. We again did Beethoven's 'Archduke' at several musical soirees.

I also interested the Mexican Philharmonic in taking the annual winner of the ABC Concerto and Vocals competition on as a soloist in Mexico with the orchestra as part of his or her prize. Like so much in this life however, continuity of an idea depends on the commitment of one's

successor, and when I left Mexico and took early retirement in 1997, the new Ambassador had other interests, and the Director of the Orchestra had changed.

Was it all worthwhile? In retrospect yes. Finding musos of similar (or preferably much better) talent than me in alien environments was always a buzz, and performing with them great fun. That it may have incidentally raised our stocks where Australian diplomats could play music was an extra bonus. I remember the British Ambassador in Mexico, Adrian Beamish, being gob smacked when my trio performed the Archduke at a Commonwealth Day concert at his Embassy. It showed a musical competence of which he and too many of his British (and European) colleagues would never have assumed an Australian capable.

Having now lived for the last 10 years in Australia, I am painfully conscious that having a cricket tragic for a Prime Minister with little or no interest in the arts does not translate into inspiration or funding for cultural activities, or any motivation at the national level to raise Australia's cultural profile abroad. Like other officers in the Commonwealth public service, diplomats have been told to shut up and hew the party line. For DFAT officers, most desirable outcomes are trade-based, and promotion depends more on a carefully selective memory than any individual, let alone quirky, effort to promote Australia's broader image.

A final thought. I don't often agree with the columnist, Frank Devine, but his recent article on the new tourist promotion slogan was right on the money. He suggested that an appropriate response from a cool person to the aggressive question in the recently ill-conceived trade promotion 'Where the bloody hell are you?' is: 'None of your f..... business', and then being prompted to find far more salubrious places to be on holiday. Selling the nation in such a crass and cultureless way does us all a disservice. Surely we can and should do much better.